

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Public Access Computer Hardware Upgrade Program

The following questions and answers are for your information to support your outreach efforts and follow-up to questions you might have or receive about the grant.

1) Q: Why is the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation providing funds to upgrade computer hardware?

A: Ensuring libraries can stay up-to-date with technology is critical to bridging the digital divide. This grant program is a one-time program designed to level the playing fields between libraries that were granted older computer models with other libraries that received newer models in more recent years. These grants will allow the first 18 states to receive foundation grants through the U.S. Library Program and recipients of grants through the Native American Access to Technology Program (NAATP) to have the same technology base as the rest of the country.

While the older machines, granted between 1997 and 2000, have proven to be effective workstations in a public access computing environment, they were highly customized. Though many libraries have leveraged foundation grants into additional funding to replace and add computers, many libraries in the first 18 states (AL, LA, MS, AR, KY, WV, NM, SC, OK, FL, CA, TN, ID, MT, GA, MI, TX, AZ) and many who received grants under NAATP still are using the older customized machines. The most recent 32 state grantees are using a more updated model, and share a common support and technology base to help leverage usability, software, and security.

2) Q: What is the goal of this grant program?

A: The ultimate goal is to encourage libraries across the country to keep equipment and infrastructure up to date, which will be critical to reducing inequities in technology access. Keeping infrastructure current involves developing plans and budgets to support investments in hardware and software technology, supporting increasingly faster Internet connection speeds, and technical support to keep machines running efficiently. The foundation also wants to engage the wider community—businesses, state and local governments, nonprofits, and other library supporters—to support libraries and public access to computers.

Nearly every public library in the United States offers free, public access to the Internet, but together we can do more to ensure libraries are successful portals to technology. As Bill Gates Sr. said in an address to the Public Library Association (PLA) in February 2004, “If equipment is old and outdated, computers in public libraries may be more a *reflection* of society’s inequities than a *remedy* for them.”

3) Q: How will these grant funds be used?

A: The grant will be used to fund replacement of hardware such as CPUs, monitors, keyboards, and mice. Grant funds also can be used for upgrades to software, support services (i.e. extended warranty), and installation and configuration (i.e. the installation or purchase of Centurion Guard tool or security software installation and configuration).

4) Q: How did the foundation determine how much money each state would receive?

A: Eligibility for hardware and software upgrades was based on the prior foundation public access computer grant received during the initial phase of the U.S. Library Program.

5) Q: Is this grant from the foundation meant to replace federal, state or local government funding?

A: No. The foundation hopes to be a catalyst for additional partners from both the private and public sector to support libraries and assume the challenge of providing broad public access to information technologies. In fact, this one-time hardware upgrade program is designed to help communities in the first 18 state grantees more easily sustain investments in libraries and public access computing in the future.

Throughout the U.S. Library Program, the foundation's activities, including grantmaking, technical assistance, training, and partnership building, have been designed to encourage long-term local technological and financial sustainability. Many of the foundation's grantees have successfully used the foundation grant to leverage other funds and partnerships. This kind of support from diverse organizations is even more critical for libraries as they move into the 21st century.

6) Q: Will libraries be required to use Microsoft products?

A: No. The grants will allow each state library to decide which hardware and software to purchase based on the needs of their own communities. Furthermore, the foundation and Microsoft are separate and independent organizations.

Though we are not tied into using Microsoft products, the foundation is pleased that Microsoft and Gateway have been important partners in this effort, providing free or reduced cost software and hardware.

7) Q: What challenges do libraries face in sustaining their public access computer services?

A: In a time of budget cuts and conflicting priorities, librarians are struggling to keep their doors open and their computers running. Sustaining public access computing programs will require ongoing investment and support in three key areas:

Keeping libraries open

In response to the fiscal climate across the country, many libraries—big or small, urban or rural—are reducing their services or building hours to meet ever-shrinking budgets. Dwindling levels of access to the public library have always been a disservice to communities, but now these cuts limit computer and Internet use for some patrons who rely on the service.

Training

Libraries need to be staffed by individuals who have the technical skills required to provide excellent public access computing services. A recent survey found that 40 percent of libraries do not offer any formal technology training for their staff, despite the many benefits that result. Staff turnover increases the necessity of ongoing training.

Technology

- *Hardware and software upgrades:* Hardware and software are the most recognizable costs. Heavy use of library computers and the changing nature of technology make hardware and software upgrades a necessity.
- *Internet connectivity:* Telecommunications and Internet access costs are an ongoing concern for public libraries. The libraries most in need have relied on the federal E-rate program, which offers deep discounts in connectivity costs. About 50 percent of public libraries use E-rate funding to cover monthly telecommunications and Internet access fees, while others have used the E-rate program to purchase higher bandwidth Internet connectivity sooner than they could have otherwise have afforded.
- *Technical support:* Ensuring that computers are working increases a community's return on investment in public access computing. Yet, in-house technical support is often unavailable to all but the largest libraries. For the rest, the prohibitively high cost of support often leads to downtime for computers.

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